

In the late 1980s, artist Jim Sanborn was hired to create a piece of art to be displayed at the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. This was a big commission! What an honor to create a unique piece of art for the CIA. Sanborn thought he would have a little fun with this project. He contacted Edward Scheidt, the retired chairman of the CIA's Cryptographic Center. Scheidt is an expert in encryption and cryptology. Sanborn wanted Scheidt to help him create a message in code for his CIA art piece.

On Nov. 3, 1990, Jim Sanborn's piece of art was unveiled at CIA headquarters. **It's called *Kryptos*, which is the Greek word for "HIDDEN."** It's a giant copper screen that looks like a wavy, unrolled scroll. On this giant screen, there is a word puzzle. To the untrained eye, it looks like a mass of random letters. But Sanborn and Scheidt say there are four encrypted, or hidden, messages within that mass of letters. And those four messages make up a riddle.

Jim Sanborn thought the folks at the CIA would figure out the puzzle in a matter of weeks. He was wrong. **Over the past 30 years, three of the four messages have been decoded. The fourth one remains a mystery.** And even if someone were to correctly decode the fourth message, they'd still have to put the four messages together and solve the riddle. **Code experts and amateurs all over the world are working on cracking the code and revealing the message of *Kryptos*.**

Can you imagine spending 30 years or more trying to decode a hidden message or solve a riddle? And there's no prize involved. This isn't a message that is going to save lives or reveal the mysteries of the universe. Yet how many people are investing time and skill into cracking its code?

An even more fascinating form of hidden message comes from the year 499 BC. There was a Greek ruler [named Histiaeus] who tried to stir up a revolt against the Persian king Darius I. There is an old legend that he sent the plans for the revolt to his nephew by shaving the head of his servant and tattooing a message about the revolt on the servant's scalp. Then he let the servant's hair grow back over the tattoo, and sent the servant to visit his nephew, with instructions to shave his servant's head once he arrived.

What an ingenious way to hide a message in plain sight! Turning the messenger into the message. Think about that for a moment. **THE MESSENGER BECAME THE MESSAGE.** That sounds exactly like what God did when He wanted to share the most important message in history with us. **He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be both the messenger and the message.** John, in the prologue to his Gospel wrote, *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . ."*

Hidden messages can be fascinating, but I am so grateful that God didn't hide His message from us. No cryptology, no codes, no puzzles, no fine print. In the Garden of Eden, God walked with Adam and Eve. And God communicated with them. The Creator and the creations lived in relationship with one another until the day when Adam and Eve chose to break that relationship of trust. Later God spoke directly to people like Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Jacob. And God spoke through the prophets like Isaiah and Amos and Hosea. If you read the Bible from start to finish, you'll see that God is always trying to communicate with His people. And God's message to us is plain and simple and backed up by God's own character. **So if the incredible expanse of human history covered in the 66 books of the Bible could be distilled into one completely essential message, what would it be?**

John tells us in the most famous single verse in the Bible—John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

Martin Luther called this *"the Gospel in miniature."* In other words, if all the Bibles in the world suddenly disappeared and we could hold on to only this one verse, he feels we would know everything that is absolutely vital in the Bible.

I read about this big conference where speaker after speaker lined up to speak on various topics. Finally, the last speaker of the evening stepped up to the mic. He said, *"I have only ten minutes, I barely know where to start."*

From the back of the room, someone shouted, *"Start at the ninth minute."*

If the writer of Scripture had ten minutes to explain God's character, God's love and God's plans for humanity, then he might start at the ninth minute with this verse: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

For God so loved the world . . . That is the beginning of it all—the mind and heart of God. The statement that defines reality. That defines the universe. That defines all human experience. **God so loved the world . . .** The same God that Isaiah saw "high and lifted up" on the day that King Uzziah died. The same God who guided the Children of Israel through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The same God who spoke—and the earth was created. **This same God so loved.**

But look what God loved—THE WORLD. I don't believe John meant by this that God is crazy about mountains or lakes or deserts or sunflowers or whatever. I BELIEVE HE WAS TALKING ABOUT YOU AND ME, AND ALL PEOPLE.

Creative and crafty humanity. That's who God loves. This complex creature—Jesus makes deserts bloom and lakes die. He makes people of every color and nationality and culture and ability and personality. **The world.** That's truly limitless love.

That's whom God loves. Us!

A few years ago, a high school teacher in Colorado named Brittni Darras found out that one of her best students had come very close to committing suicide. Darras was heartbroken to think that one of her students could be so despondent that she would consider taking her own life. So Darras asked the girl's mother if she could write her daughter a letter.

In the letter, Brittni Darras told the girl what she saw when she looked at her. She saw a young woman with a great personality and intellect. A young woman with a bright future. When the girl received the letter, she remarked to her mother, ***"I didn't think anyone would say such nice things to me. I didn't think anyone would miss me when I'm gone."***

The letter had such a positive effect on that young student that the teacher, Brittni Darras committed to writing a personal letter to every single one of her students—all 130 of them—to tell them all the good things she saw in them.

Darras says that her students loved their letters. They read them again and again. They shared them with their friends. One girl said, "I'm going to keep this forever." They never realized before how much they mattered to their teacher. **They never realized that she saw something special in each one of them.**

"God so loved the world. . ." *God's love for all of us is limitless.* If God's love for us is limitless, then what do we have to fear? Doesn't it stand to reason that God has good plans and purposes for us? Doesn't it stand to reason that we can come to God with anything, including our doubts and questions and failures, and not be turned away?

It's amazing. That is the first great truth that is essential to our faith. BUT THERE IS MORE!

For God so loved the world...THAT HE GAVE HIS ONE AND ONLY SON. . . . That is also amazing! In fact, it is almost beyond comprehension. The very simplicity of the Gospel is an obstacle to our faith. God loves us so much that He was willing to give us the ultimate gift—**THE GIFT OF HIS SON!!** It is as Simple—yet so profound.

Pastor Adrian Rogers makes the point that a lot of people reject the message of God's love in the life and death of Jesus because it's too amazing to understand and too simple to accept.

Rogers met a lawyer one day, and they were chatting about the books they read. Rogers said the primary book he read was the Bible. The lawyer thought this was a little short-sighted of Rogers. "If you don't read any further than that," the lawyer asked, ***"how do you know what to talk about when you speak to people?"***

Rogers responded that all people everywhere have only three problems: *sin, sorrow and death.* And he found the wisdom to address those problems in the Bible.

The lawyer disagreed. There are so many more problems in the world. But Rogers suggested he take some time to think about it and get back to him. The lawyer took some time to ponder their conversation. And when he approached Adrian Rogers again, he said, ***"Man has only three problems: sin, sorrow and death."***

And Adrian Rogers responded, ***"And Jesus Christ is the only answer to all three problems. You give me all of the wisdom of this world . . . but there is no other answer apart from the CROSS."***

Our sin is what separated us from God and breaks our relationship with the Creator of Life. And that broken relationship is the source of all our sorrow and of death. But God loves the world too much to let us bear the consequences of our sin. Jesus is the answer to our broken relationship with God. Jesus took on the sin that separates us from God. He died on the cross to put our sins to death once and for all. And he rose from the dead to show us that, through him, our relationship to God, the Source of Life, has been restored.

A famous theologian, Karl Barth, was asked what he thought was the most important WORD in the New Testament. You would think the answer would be "Jesus" or "faith" or "love" or "grace." But that wasn't Karl Barth's answer. He said the most important Word in the New Testament is "HUPER" (pronounced hoop ER). **Huper—spelled h-u-p-e-r—is a Greek preposition meaning "on behalf of" or "in place of."** So, when Barth called huper the most important word, he meant the most important of **all truths is that we are significant because Jesus took our place on the cross that we may be saved.**

It is our understanding of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only Son. But there is still more.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . . that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." It makes no difference what our lives have been like.

It may be that we feel we have been the biggest loser, the biggest failure, the biggest sinner who ever lived. We may have more regrets than a centipede has legs. It makes no difference! That is the glory of the Gospel. **We can make a new beginning. We can be a new person—the person God created us to be.**

Baseball fans are familiar with the name Mickey Mantle. Mantle played 18 seasons with the New York Yankee with great success. Three-time American League Most Valuable Player. Seven World Series titles. Five hundred thirty-six career home runs. Inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Few players accomplished all the things Mickey Mantle did.

His life after baseball wasn't as successful. He turned to drinking heavily and alienated his family and friends. He hurt a lot of people who cared about him.

But one of Mantle's teammates, Bobby Richardson, never gave up on him. He shared the message of Jesus with Mantle on many occasions and visited him in the hospital when Mantle was recovering from a liver transplant. In 1995, however, as Mickey Mantle lay dying, he finally gave his heart to Christ. Bobby Richardson got to witness the joy and peace that filled Mickey's last days.

At Mantle's funeral, Bobby told of how his wife had knelt down next to Mickey's bed a few days before his death to talk to him about his relationship with God. She wanted to make sure that any questions or doubts had been answered, and that Mickey was fully assured of that relationship. Mickey assured her that he knew everything he needed to know and he recited John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever—that's you and me—whoever believes in him **shall not perish but have eternal life.**

What a remarkable promise!! *You and I can have life that never ends through faith in Jesus Christ.* You have heard that truth all your life, but have you ever made it your own? It does not require a grand emotional kind of experience. It does not require a spectacular vision.

Your experience of God's GRACE IS YOUR OWN. But there needs to come that time in your life and mine when by faith we make a conscious decision to surrender everything we are and everything we hope to be to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

God so loved the world. THAT IS US!!

That He gave His only Son. The Lord high and lifted up humbled Himself. **For whom? Whoever**—that's every one of us regardless of how badly we may have messed up our lives. **That whoever believes in him may have eternal life.** Have you taken that step of faith? Isn't it time you do it today?

YES, IT IS ONE VERSE BUT IT IS THE DEFINING VERSE FOR BOTH YOUR LIFE AND MINE. Amen.